

GOD AND THE REAL YOU

Genesis 12:1-9

Luke 19:1-10

March 4, 1973

BETHANY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Lafayette, Indiana

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The Bible is a collection of very old books written by men and about men who lived thousands of years ago. The Bible has become a tradition: we keep an open copy in the sanctuary to indicate that ~~the~~ it has special meaning for us: we own copies of the Bible and display them in our homes to indicate further, that the book is ^{personally significant} special for us: we give copies of the Bible as gifts on special occasions: brides sometimes carry Bibles down the aisle. The Bible is a very prominent book among Christian people, except when it comes to the matter of reading it. Somewhere along the line most of us have concluded that; one, the content of the Bible is outdated and irrelevant; two, the Bible is a collection of religious doctrines ^{that are irrelevant} and stories of people who are unreal; and three, ~~the Bible is so hopelessly archaic we couldn't understand it even if we wanted to read it.~~ ^{in the words of a line from Derry & Beas "The things that your liable to read in the Bible - Ain't necessarily so."}

These conclusions are wrong. And this sermon introduction is, in part, a commercial for an Adult Seminar that is beginning next Sunday at 9:30 under the title, ("Understanding the Bible.") More to the point, I would like to explore with you this morning two stories from the Bible which are remarkably relevant, and which - after just a little bit of investigation - appear to have been written for a mentality and a religious mind set that is still prevalent - thousands of years after the fact.

Conclusion number one and two were that the Bible is out-of date and that the people of the Bible are otherworldly, religious, holy people - not like you and me. Yet, in fact, God comes up with unlikeable rather unlikely and ordinary friends in the pages of the Bible.

Let's think first about Abraham. His story occurs in the beginning; and both ~~Jews~~ Jews and Christians know him as the "father of the faith." Abraham at the age of 75, was instructed by God to pick up his belongings, gather his family, and move to a new land God had promised to give him. In addition, Abraham ^{childless at 75} was promised that his family would become a great nation and that all the people of the earth would come to appreciate and honor him. Abraham did as he was told: he packed his belongings, gathered his family, traveled across Mesopotamia into Canaan and promptly began to build altars to the Lord. So far so good; and yet even at this point we raise an eyebrow and wonder whether this is for real. Well, the next part is - although time didn't allow me to read this morning.

Right after Abraham builds those altars to the Lord things start going down hill and the story starts sounding a little more real. A famine hits Canaan, and Abraham has to decide between feeding his family and living in the land God gave him. Abraham chose to eat - and moved out of the land into Egypt where food was plentiful. Did you ever sacrifice a high and lofty ideal because of economic necessity? Abraham did - right there in the 12th Chapter of Genesis and that's only the beginning.

Sarah, Abraham's wife, was a very beautiful woman. And Abraham - being a practical man - knew that in an alien land her beauty well might cause him real problems. A man could get killed over a woman like that. And so Abraham convinced Sarah his wife to pretend that she was his sister. And what he expected happened. The Egyptians appreciated her beauty, someone told Pharaoh about it, and before you know it, Sarah has become a part of Pharaoh's harem. So delighted was he that Abraham was showered with gifts: sheep, oxen, donkeys, servants: Abraham became wealthy. Did you ever sell out like that? Did you ever hurt someone you loved to save your own neck?

Now, at this point that conclusion that the Bible is full of stories about unreal, other worldly people ought to become a little shaky. Father Abraham, promised a land of his own, and so many descendents that they would be a mighty nation, is living it up down in Egypt at Pharaoh's expense, with his wife - his only hope to have children, installed in Pharaoh's stable of lovely women. And, at this point, the Bible in a strange way - begins to say something about God - something theological. Common sense would dictate that God go back to Mesopotamia and find another likely candidate for ("Father of the Faith") Abraham looks very much like a loser. But God doesn't give up on Abraham: God sees something in him that hasn't had an opportunity to grow yet. And we begin to sense something of the nature of God in Abraham's saga: patience, faithfulness, forgiveness, love for unlikely and ordinary people. Because, as it turns out, Pharaoh falls on hard times, and discovering finally that his favorite concubine is really another man's wife, gives her back to Abraham, escorts all of them - the whole family and their newly acquired belongings - to the border. And the story begins all over again: they move back into the land, and Abraham, older and wiser, takes up where he left off, building altars to the Lord.

God - the Bible seems to be saying from the very beginning - is interested in some

rather ordinary people., who do some rather ordinary and human things. \| But let's look again - to a different time, centuries later, in the city of Jericho. \| This story is in the New Testament and it involves another very unlikely man by the name of Zaccheus.

Zaccheus was the chief tax collector in Jericho. \| Now that tells us quite a bit about the man. \| The Romans were the rules of Judah and they had devised a very effective way of collecting revenue from their Judean subjects. \| The job of tax collector was sold to the highest bidder. \| And the man who got the job was allowed to set whatever rates he chose - so long as the Romans got what they wanted. \| And so it was an immensely profitable occupation. Zaccheus was the Chief tax collector: \| that means he set the rates - and presided over a team of men who actually did the collecting. \| It also means that no one in all of Jericho was so hated, so despised, as Zaccheus. \| He was a traitor to his people, his nation, his religion: he was cooperating with the enemy. \| Worse yet, he was becoming rich as a result of his people's subjugation. \| Perhaps you can remember seeing pictures of what happened after the liberation of Paris during the Second World War. \| The shop keepers and merchants who had cooperated with the Nazis and profitted by the occupation were tared and feathered. \| The government officials were tried for treason - those who were not executed in the streets. \| Well, that's a clue to the way the people of Jericho would have felt about Zaccheus.

So when Jesus came to Jericho and noticed Zaccheus sitting up in a tree to get a better view, and then called him by name and invited himself to Zaccheus's house for lunch, the good people of Jericho were a little disturbed. \| Of all the people - of all the Pharisees and Scribes and good, respectable religious folk he could have chosen to be seen with - why in the world would he pick Zaccheus?

And again the Bible seems to be saying that God sees something in ordinary people ~~that~~ that nobody else can see. \| Jesus saw something in Zaccheus that Zaccheus himself hadn't been able to see. \| Zaccheus had sold out: \| he had chosen a way of life that isolated him from his friends, his religion, his nation - in order to become wealthy. \| He was hated and he knew it. He couldn't have had a very high regard for himself: \| he had to have spent many a sleepless night wallowing in his own guilt. \| But here was a man who thought he was worth something.

Abraham and Zaccheus are two examples of Biblical men who were very human: \| men whose stories ring true because they acted like people we know - they did things that we've done.

And through them comes a word about God and man that is remarkably relevant.

Thousands of years after them a major religious problem for a lot of people is the idea that God finds them loveable; that God loves us as we are; that we don't have to pretend we're something we're not in order to become God's friends; that God is vitally concerned about our small, private lives; and that he sees something in us that other people don't see - that we sometimes don't see ourselves.

We've been taught, most of us, that the Chief end of man is to meet the expectations of others. And that serves us well - sometimes. It motivates us to strive for excellence - Sometimes: it pushes us into extending ourselves, to becoming more than we would be on our own - sometimes. But sometimes it has another effect. Sometimes trying to meet the expectations of others causes us to distrust ourselves. Sometimes it causes us to try to do things we really don't want to do, or to pretend to be something we aren't. We've all known the futility and agony which results when a father expects his son to be an All-American athlete, and an All-American ^{little} boy is not. I knew a college student who almost had a nervous breakdown because all his life his parents had expressed their expectation that he would become a Doctor; and after two years of Pre-medical education it was abundantly clear to him and his professors that he didn't want to be a doctor.

Sometimes we carry those expectations right into adulthood, and life becomes a test track for us; just one race after another. Sometimes expectations which were planted in us in childhood become so oppressive that we end up hating ourselves for failing to meet them, and needing psychiatric care in order to live comfortably with ourselves.

When it comes to religion, our culture over the years has formulated a rather clear expectation, a detailed model of what the "religious" person ought to be. It involves being other-worldly, not enjoying life too much, praying, dressing conservatively, living moderately; and using a certain vocabulary, punctuated with stock, pious phrases. I keep encountering that in people who tell me they aren't very religious, and somehow ^{conclude} that that feeling disqualifies them from Christian discipleship and Church membership. What they mean is that they don't measure up to the expectation level of "a religious person" in our culture; and I always want to tell them that God's friends in the Bible - and even Jesus himself - wouldn't have done very well on that score either.

For the Biblical witness is precisely that God does find time for people like us, and that

he saw in them something of worth and value, even when nobody else did. The Biblical witness is that God is singularly uninterested in and unimpressed with the expectation levels men place on ^{each other} others. Particular when it comes to religion. Jesus obviously didn't care that Zaccheus was known as a sinner and traitor by the good people of Jericho.

In fact one way of reading the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life and ministry is - as a mounting conflict between him and the traditionally religious people of his day. The people who were most offended by the Zaccheus incident were religious people: people whose conforming to the popular expectations of their religion had shut them off from others: people who had drummed Zaccheus out of the human race. An example of that happened in the letters to the editor column of the Journal Courier last week. In the name of religion a writer proceeded to try, judge and then convict ~~the~~ ⁱⁿ words of hatred, a young woman who had an abortion. Jesus wasn't interested in that: he was opposed to the kind of religion that tells its adherents that they have arrived; that there is no more growing to do; that living a religious life is simply a matter of conforming to their own expectation level.

God saw a "Father of the Faith" in an unlikely senite by the name of Abraham. And when Abraham didn't come through: when he failed to be what God saw in him, God didn't give up: he ~~star~~ helped Abraham put the broken pieces of his life back together and start out again. Jesus saw something in a wretched little man by the name of Zaccheus: a man who defied every commonly accepted expectation of a "religious man". Jesus saw the real Zaccheus.

Someone has written

God sees a princess in every scrub girl

a free man in every slave

a son in every stranger

And in a recent edition of the Devotional Magazine "Alive Now", there is a theological phraphrase of - the story of Cinderella:

"She was a princess

in rags

all

with/the possibility

waiting to be set free.

Grace has a lot of official definitions.

I like to think of it

as God

with a glass slipper

in his hand. (~~"Alive Now, Winter 72, P. 14)~~

And if that's a bit too flippant for you, you can have it in the words of a Yale Divinity School professor who used to tell his students:

"It's true that God never asks us to do more than we can manage with our own human gifts and possibilities. But we always underestimate how much that is." ~~H.R. Niebuhr~~
God sees the real you: the person you keep hidden from others: the person you hide from yourself. God sees potential in you and me that we didn't ~~xx~~ know was there. God knows who we are - who we really are beneath all the striving to meet the expectations of others. God knows us - and God loves us very much. That is the Good News. It means we are free to affirm and enjoy ^{being} ~~by~~ who we are: it means we are free to grow and become all that he wants us to become.

Abraham -- Zacchews -- You and me.

AMEN

Father, sometimes we do have difficulty being ourselves: sometimes we spend an immense amount of time trying to be someone else. Forgive us for that, and help us to know that you love us as we are: that you have given us all we need to be your children. Open us to the good news that in Jesus Christ you have made us your friends. Amen